

## Concord with collective nouns revisited

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### *1 Introduction*

Both foreign learners and native users of English are faced with the problem of how to treat collective nouns, since there is a choice between singular and plural concord marks. It is often argued that singular forms are used when a collective is thought of as a unit and plural forms when the speaker or writer has the individual members in mind (as pointed out by eg Poutsma 1914:283; Quirk et al 1985:316). In this tradition there is a distinction made between singular, or grammatical, concord on the one hand and plural, or notional, concord on the other. The former involves agreement with the syntactic form of the subject and the latter agreement with its meaning. We would therefore expect that this difference in point of view is noticeable in [1] and [2], the writer of [1] thinking of the family as a unit and the writer of [2] thinking of it as a number of separate individuals:

- [1] Laura's *family* was Catholic. (FLOB G12)<sup>1</sup>
- [2] A third partner, Michael Trull, whose *family* own the La Bri vineyard in South Africa, joined the White brothers. (FLOB E05)

The singular/plural distinction can also be seen with personal pronouns referring to collective nouns, as in [3] and [4] below. Pronominal agreement differs from verbal agreement in that the connection between the pronoun and its antecedent is weaker than between the subject and the verb, which means that pronouns are more easily influenced by the semantic context.

- [3] The *crowd* staged *its* own mad scene in salvos of cheers and applause and finally a standing ovation (...) (Brown C02)
- [4] A small *crowd* stood in the square, presenting *their* final messages to the passengers. (LOB N20)

In this context it should be pointed out that the choice between a singular and a plural concord mark is sometimes influenced by a need to avoid ambiguity. If the writer of [5] below had written ‘lose *it*’, the expression would have allowed the two different interpretations ‘confuse’ and ‘go crazy’.

- [5] If you use too much jargon to a ‘lay’ *audience* you will lose *them*. (FLOB F03)

Agreement is also displayed in relative pronouns in English. There is great consistency in the use of *which* + singular verb, on the one hand, and *who* + plural verb on the other (cf [6] and [7] below). *Which* only appeared with singular verbs (LOB 17, FLOB 9, Brown 15, Frown 11), *that* was also used with only singular verbs (LOB 2, FLOB 10, Brown 1, Frown 15) (cf 8 below) and *who* was used with plural verbs (LOB 10, FLOB 18, Brown 12, Frown 11) – with one single exception [9] from FLOB. These results incidentally indicate a decrease in the use of *which* as a relative marker in both BrE and AmE. This is supported by the findings of Hundt (1997).

- [6] (...) it was a threat to the *government which* under Ne Win *has* steadfastly fought against his country’s ethnic groups. (Frown B12)
- [7] So collectors will want some of the figures from the past of their favourite regiments, ‘wiped out’ by their own *Government, who have* accomplished what the Chinese army just failed to do in the Korean War. (FLOB E06)
- [8] The deal is another example of a *company that stubs its* toe – but has a decent franchise – selling out at what appears to be a reasonable price (...) (Frown A36)
- [9] They kept the pace fast with many digressions, a sensible tactic to keep the attention of an *audience who has* not been interested enough in cooking to try it before. (FLOB C04)

The distribution of verbs with relative pronouns indicates that it is reasonable to treat *which* as a singular form and *who* as a plural form when referring to collective nouns. Jacobsson (1970:355) and Zandvoort (1975:162) argue that *which* is used when the group is in focus and *who* when the individuals making up the group are in focus. Juul (1975:96f) and Levin (1998b) both found a high degree of co-variation between *which* and singular verbs, on the one hand, and *who* and plural verbs, on the other (but cf Thagg Fisher 1985:142f for evidence of a higher degree of variation). It is possible that the predominance of singular verb

forms with relative *that* in the present investigation is due to the fact that singular verb forms are more frequent than plural in the material as a whole.

The aim of this study is to examine concord with collective nouns in BrE and AmE, and in particular to see if there is any evidence of change in concord patterns in the last 30 years. The corpora used were LOB and Brown, containing, respectively, BrE and AmE texts sampled from 1961. These were in turn compared with FLOB, the Freiburg update of LOB, and Frown, the Freiburg update of Brown. The sampling year for FLOB is 1991 and for Frown 1992. The compilation of Frown was not completed when this was written, and therefore Brown and Frown are not yet strictly comparable. The entire corpora were searched for 27 collectives.<sup>2</sup> Concord for each token of a noun was only counted once, except in those cases in which both singular and plural concord marks occurred. The sub-corpora did not contain enough tokens to allow separate counts, and were therefore either conflated into larger sections, such as ‘press’ or ‘imaginative’, or not studied individually, as for instance the category ‘miscellaneous.’ The press texts include the categories ‘reportage’ and ‘editorial’, and the imaginative category comprises mostly fiction. It has been shown that there is systematic variation in the concord patterns with collective nouns between different written genres (Fries 1981; Levin 1998a) – and even between different sections in newspapers (Levin 1998b). It is therefore doubtful whether it is at all advisable to conflate categories from the corpora, but in this study it was deemed necessary in order to obtain enough tokens.

The difference between AmE and BrE in the area of concord with collective nouns has been frequently discussed. The received wisdom is that plural verbs are used ‘far less commonly in AmE than BrE’ (Quirk et al 1985:758), while plural personal pronouns are frequent also in AmE. Algeo’s (1988:21) claim that there is ‘a strong preference’ for plural verbs in BrE is supported neither by the present study nor by Levin (1998a). Johansson’s (1979:205) surmise that singular verbal concord is slightly more common than plural verbal concord in BrE seems to be nearer the truth. It is one thing to describe this difference, but quite another to explain it. The explanation is perhaps better sought further back in the history of the two varieties. On the other hand, Langacker (1988:38) is of the opinion that this dialectal difference also represents a small difference in meaning. Speakers of BrE and AmE ‘conventionally employ slightly different images to construe the situation for expressive purposes’.

Yet another significant factor influencing concord was adduced by Strang (1969:107). Collective nouns preceded by determiners or numerals associated with singular forms (eg *a, one, every, each, this* and *that*) are frequently used

with singular verbs. In this material, *each* (4), *every* (6), *one* (1), *no* (6), *another* (2) and *that* (1) were only used with singular verb forms, whereas *a(n)* (108 singular and 4 plural) and *this* (21 singular and 1 plural) appeared with both types of concord. Example [10] is a typical instance, whereas [11] is an exception:

[10] Not that every married *couple is* happy (...) (FLOB B07)

[11] This *Government are* dedicated to a sustainable, economic recovery based on stable, low inflation. (FLOB H15)

Hundt (1998:88) points out that the use of a plural verb with a singular determiner in [11] above – found in category H (Miscellaneous) – indicates that this is not an example of notional concord, of viewing the government as a group of individuals. Instead, it appears that plural verbal concord is the norm with the noun *government* in British ‘officialese’ (see also Fries 1981). This usage has been stable over the 30 year period. AmE ‘officialese’, on the other hand, uses singular concord with collective nouns. In this context it should be mentioned that there is also a difference in reference between BrE and AmE with the noun *government*. In BrE the government consists of the Prime Minister and the ministers, while in AmE the government denotes the Congress, the executive branch and the Federal judiciary (Algeo 1986). However, the singular is sometimes used with *government* in official documents in BrE. This is a reflection of the tendency that ‘plural concord is used with the British government and singular concord with foreign governments’, as noted by Bauer (1994:64). Compare [12] below:

[12] (...) the *Government of Denmark is* applying the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in respect of Greenland. (LOB H14)

Some authors (eg Zandvoort 1975:259; Wales 1996:162) admit that it is often difficult to notice a distinction in meaning between singular and plural forms. If it were only a matter of point of view, there would not be any change in this area, unless of course native users’ perception of these nouns either as units or groups of people changes over time.

## ***2 Diachronic change***

Variable concord with collective nouns has been a feature of English since Old English times (for an overview, see Liedtke 1910). The question of a possible change in the use of concord in Present-Day English has attracted interest in the last few years. Bauer (1994:61f) records an increase in singular verbal concord during this century in editorials from *The Times*. The noun *government* showed

a tendency towards singular concord from about 1930, and this is interpreted as evidence that the development towards singular concord in BrE began before AmE started to influence BrE to any large extent. Bailey (1987:6–7) claims that ‘fashionable younger speakers’ in Britain now favour singular concord. His evidence seems to be based on impressionistic observation, however.

Siemund (1995:365f) studied the press sections from LOB and FLOB and found that the number of collectives occurring with *both* singular and plural concord had decreased and that the number of nouns being used consistently with either singular or plural verbs had increased. His conclusion is that variable concord with a particular noun ‘reflects notional concord that is being maintained until grammaticalisation takes place, ie until one variant is perceived to be wrong’. In this study the same tendency is observable in the newspaper texts with eight unclear cases in LOB and only four in FLOB. In the category ‘religion/learned’ the proportion was four vs three and in imaginative eight vs eight. This may be a reflection of the differences between the genres. Mair (1998:155) classifies newspaper language as a ‘fast’ genre, which quickly absorbs new features from spontaneous spoken language. Fiction, and in particular learned writing, is classified as ‘slower’ or a more conservative genre.

Diachronic change in pronominal concord has not been treated in such a systematic way. Notional concord is generally more frequent with pronouns than with verbs. Hundt (1998:89) assumes that, since concord with personal pronouns is more variable than verbal concord it ‘may turn out to be a stronghold for notional concord’. Wales (1996:163) writes that there is pressure for native speakers to use plural personal pronouns when referring to collective nouns, because these forms are the preferred alternative in co-reference with ‘notionally plural’ indefinite pronouns like *everyone*. Another factor which possibly provides an analogy here, according to Wales (*ibid*), is *they* meaning ‘people in general’.

From the above it would be expected that there is a decrease of plural concord with verbs and – if there is any change in the area of pronominal concord – an increase in plural concord with pronouns.

Tables 1 and 2 show the percentages of plural concord for four selected groups of sub-corpora. The raw figures of plural tokens and total number of tokens are included within brackets.

Table 1: Plural concord with collective nouns in LOB and FLOB

	Press (A+B)			Religion/learned/ scientific (D+J)		
	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.
LOB	18% 23/127	8% 1/13	36% 20/56	29% 17/58	33% 3/9	38% 5/13
FLOB	13% 18/141	20% 5/25	41% 20/49	25% 15/61	36% 5/14	54% 12/22
	Skills/trades/hobbies (E)			Imaginative (F+G+K+L+M+N+P)		
	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.
LOB	30% 6/20	50% 2/4	75% 6/8	19% 15/79	38% 10/26	61% 40/66
FLOB	32% 10/31	57% 4/7	35% 6/17	25% 32/127	71% 27/38	65% 42/65

Some differences between the genres can be noticed in Tables 1 and 2. The press texts contain low percentages of plural forms, whereas imaginative texts contain high percentages. This may stem from a higher level of ‘personal involvement’ in the fictional texts than in newspapers. It seems likely that some types of journalistic texts more often than imaginative texts focus on the referents of collective nouns as units rather than as groups of individuals. The categories D+J ‘religion/science’ and E ‘skills/hobbies’ were at an intermediate level. In Levin (1998a, 1998b) it was found that plural concord is frequent in categories such as fiction and the sports pages of newspapers, whereas it is less frequent in emotionally neutral or detached categories, such as learned writing and news reporting.

Table 2: Plural concord with collective nouns in Brown and Frown. (The categories L, M, N and P were not yet available for Frown at the time of the investigation.)

	Press (A+B)			Religion/learned/ scientific (D+J)		
	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers.pron	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.
Brown	2% 2/97	14% 3/21	24% 11/45	5% 3/63	38% 3/8	25% 4/16
Frown	6% 5/82	46% 6/13	34% 10/29	15% 6/39	71% 5/7	32% 6/19
	Skills/trades/hobbies (E)			Imaginative (F+G+K+[L+M+N+P])		
	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers.pron	Verb	Rel. pron.	Pers. pron.
Brown	22% 5/23	0% 0/2	75% 3/4	19% 13/70	71% 15/21	59% 35/59
Frown	23% 5/22	50% 1/2	40% 2/5	6% 4/69	55% 11/20	47% 15/32

Two out of four BrE sub-corpora showed a decrease in plural verbal concord, whereas all four displayed an increase in plural concord in the relative pronouns and three out four with the personal pronouns. The AmE material revealed an increase of plural agreement in three out of four sub-corpora with the verbs and relative pronouns and two out of four with the personal pronouns. The differences in Tables 1 and 2 are small and should be viewed with caution. The increase in singular verbal concord in BrE newspaper texts seems to be the only change which can be ascertained with any confidence. This area needs to be studied further to determine whether this is a case of an ongoing linguistic change or random variation. However, the general pattern in both BrE and AmE seems to be that plural pronouns remain a viable alternative to singular pro-

nouns. This would indicate a divergence between verbal and pronominal concord and possibly an increase in the frequency of mixed constructions, such as in [13] and [14] below:

- [13] The *group meets* once a week in the Boliou Student Workshop. *They are* assisted and advised by members of the Art Department. (Brown H28)
- [14] (...) his Lordship's *family was* one of the worthiest in the world, although *they were* Roman Catholics. (LOB G46)

At least in LOB/FLOB, there is evidence pointing in the same general direction as the total frequencies of tokens. There was a slight increase in the number of constructions in which both singular and plural concord marks were used with the same noun token in the BrE corpora. All in all, there were 32 cases of such shifts (LOB 6, FLOB 11, Brown 9, Frown 6). These figures include all types of shifts. In the present investigation, as elsewhere, the most common type involves a singular verb followed by a plural personal pronoun (LOB 1, FLOB 9, Brown 9, Frown 4). Other shifts from singular to plural forms included singular verb/*who* (LOB 1), *which* followed by a plural verb in the next clause (LOB 2), *which*/plural personal pronoun (LOB 1, Frown 1) and a singular verb followed by plural verb (Frown 1). Only three shifts were from plural to singular forms – example [9] above, examples [16] and [17] below. This supports Nixon's (1972) claim that the likelihood for notional concord increases with the distance from the antecedent.

The number of shifts seems to be slightly higher in AmE than BrE, at least when comparing LOB and Brown. It must be stressed that the number of tokens is low and that the sampling of Frown is not yet complete. These findings lend support to Johansson's (1979:205) and Hundt's (1998:84f) results, which indicated that shifts are more likely to be found in AmE. Johansson's explanation for this is that BrE users can avoid 'discord' more easily, because they have the choice between singular and plural forms both with verbs and pronouns. Levin's (1998b) data, on the other hand, gave an indication that shifts are more frequent in BrE. In [15] it can be seen that a long distance between a node word and concord mark increases the likelihood of plural agreement. [16] and [17] are exceptional, because 'plural' *who* is followed by singular concord marks.

- [15] The British Travel *Association, which does* excellent work in taking care of all foreigners who want to have a good time here and study what is pompously called 'The British Way of Life', *have* a hard time on *their* hands. (LOB B05)



- [16] They were anxious to entertain the clinic *staff who* mostly spent *its* free time elsewhere (...) (LOB K23)
- [17] (...) it is not surprising that the *crowd* of reporters *who* greeted him upon his arrival in New York on 8 November 1911, *was* less concerned with stories of his ‘collapse’ in Berlin (...) (FLOB G21)

Wales (1996:162) comments on this ‘inconsistent usage’ of singular and plural forms and asks: ‘Are we to assume that the speaker or writer’s “point of view” has shifted from the group as a whole to the individual members, or vice versa?’ Surprisingly, Pollard and Sag (1988) claim that the choice of number ‘must be consistent’ in a local context and that we do not find examples such as [13] and [14].

The results above show that the variation is not random in those cases where there is a shift in concord. Singular forms are far more likely to be followed by plural than vice versa. Some authors have noted a universal tendency towards an increased likelihood of notional concord the longer the distance between the agreeing unit and the unit agreed with is (eg Zandvoort 1975:261; Barlow and Ferguson 1988:14f). An important factor here is undoubtedly the primacy of semantic memory over syntactic-lexical memory. It has been shown that the meaning of a sentence is more easily remembered than the form, both in long-term memory (Begg and Wickelgren 1974) and in short-term memory (Begg 1971). Nixon (1972:125) and Levin (1998a, 1998b) quantified the influence of long distances between concord marks and their antecedents in English by counting the interval length in words. Example [15] above is an excellent illustration of the influence of a long distance between subject and verb.

Wales (1996:163) observes that plural personal pronouns are particularly frequent across clause and sentence boundaries. This is a further indication that grammatical constraints play an important role in determining concord. In Table 3 the percentages of plural concord with personal pronouns occurring at different syntactic distances from their antecedents have been compared:

Table 3: Plural concord with personal pronouns across syntactic boundaries

	Same clause	Same sentence, different clause	Next sentence
LOB	31% 20/65	60% 59/99	87% 13/15
FLOB	41% 30/74	60% 62/104	86% 18/21
Brown	10% 7/71	53% 36/68	90% 18/20
Frown	10% 5/52	61% 28/46	100% 9/9

Clause boundaries in English are sometimes difficult to distinguish, but all the same, using syntactic boundaries as intervals is a useful tool for comparison. Singular concord is more frequent in AmE when the personal pronoun appears in the same clause, but, interestingly enough, the table shows that plural concord is equally frequent in AmE and BrE when the personal pronoun appears in a following clause or sentence. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the grammatical constraints in AmE to stick to grammatical concord are stronger than in BrE, but that, as soon as AmE native speakers move outside the confines of the clause, they use plural pronouns as naturally as BrE native speakers. Furthermore, the table indicates that the variation between the syntactic slots is relatively stable over time. In [18] a singular pronoun occurs in the same sentence as the antecedent and in [19] a plural pronoun in the following sentence:

[18] The ‘pocket-size’ *company* set records with \$2,170 in sales of *its* products (...) (Brown A23)

[19] But the key to successfully reviving the *company* will be having hit movies. *They have* to have hit films (...) (Frown A43)

Comparisons can also be made with the shift constructions in [13] and [14].

Results supporting the figures in Table 3 were obtained in elicitation experiments in Gernsbacher (1991) and Oakhill et al (1992). These studies deal with anaphoric pronouns occurring in a sentence following the one containing a col-

lective antecedent, and it was shown that plural pronouns were comprehended more rapidly and rated as being more normal than singular pronouns. This was true of both AmE and BrE native speakers. Pronouns used in the same sentence as the antecedent were not tested.

### **3 Conclusion**

This paper has presented some results from an investigation into grammatical change in progress. Most of the changes in concord with collective nouns recorded were very small, but some conclusions can be drawn. There seems to be a slight increase in singular verbal concord in BrE press texts, whereas plural personal pronouns remain as viable alternatives to singular personal pronouns in both BrE and AmE. It was also indicated that the influence of syntactic boundaries on concord with personal pronouns is stronger in AmE than in BrE. Plural pronouns referring to collective nouns are more common in BrE if the pronouns occur in the same clause as the antecedent, but the difference between the varieties disappears when the pronouns are placed in a following clause or sentence. This phenomenon has not been studied systematically in previous research.

Noticing grammatical change over several centuries is often fairly easy. If anything, this paper has shown that observing ongoing grammatical change is difficult. As Mair (1998: 155) points out, such change occurs through the ‘extension or marginalisation of a construction according to text-type specific stylistic norms’. The corpora used here are too limited to determine with any certainty in which direction concord with collective nouns is moving. It is obvious that bigger is better in the study of rare phenomena.

### **Notes**

1. LOB stands for the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen corpus and Brown for the Brown corpus. FLOB and Frown stand for the Freiburg updates of LOB and Brown.
2. *Army, association, audience, band, clergy, club, commission, committee, company, council, couple, crew, crowd, department, faculty, family, government, group, majority, media, minority, party, population, press, public, staff, team.*

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